Embassy of the United States of America

COMBATING WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Respect and Protect

To fight elephant poaching, the Big Life Foundation has placed 250 rangers, 21 outposts and 14 patrol vehicles across the 2-million acre Amboseli ecosystem in Kenya and Tanzania. *©Big Life Foundation*

Illicit trade in threatened and endangered species is a multi-billion-dollar business, and the increasingly intense demand for products derived from Africa's and South Asia's iconic land animals — elephants, rhinoceroses and tigers — threatens peace and security in both regions.

Loss of biodiversity affects freshwater supplies and food production, and it robs local communities of economic resources. In developing countries, rural families often depend on local wild animals and plants for economic needs. Tourism revenue, for example, may be lost if developing nations cannot depend on their unique species to draw visitors.

High demand, combined with difficult enforcement issues, attracts transnational criminal networks also involved in money laundering and trafficking in arms and narcotics. High prices for wildlife products breed corruption, threatening the rule of law and thwarting economic development in supply countries.

Black rhinos are critically endangered, and strong demand for rhino horn poses a constant threat to the small populations. *©Robert Harding World Imagery/Alamy*

While it is impossible to precisely track these animal populations, illicit killings are reaching crisis proportions. There are only about 25,000 rhinos on earth, down from 600,000 in the mid 20th century. In South Africa, where most rhinos live, a rhino is killed every 13 hours for its horn. There are roughly 600,000 elephants in Africa, one third the number a few decades ago. Experts estimate that 25,000 African elephants were killed in 2011 for their ivory. (There are no reliable numbers on elephants in South Asia.) Fewer tigers are being killed, yet there is a conservation crisis. Today roughly 3,200 tigers remain in the wild, 3 percent of the number a century ago. Tigers have become extinct in 11 out of the 24 Asian countries where they once thrived.

Local rangers and law enforcement authorities often are no match for poachers armed with AK-47s and grenade launchers or the trafficking networks that try to corrupt government officials to facilitate moving the poached animal parts across borders. Authorities warn that in some countries proceeds from poached wildlife likely finance the purchase of weapons and ammunition, exacerbating regional conflict.

Wildlife trafficking also may pose a public health risk. Up to 75 percent of human diseases — such as SARS, avian influenza or Ebola virus — may be caused by infectious agents transmitted from animals to humans. The illicit trade of animals or their parts bypasses public health controls and can put human populations at risk for disease, according to officials from the State Department's Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science.

In the early 1990s, the trade in tiger bone for traditional medicines became a major threat. *©incamerastock/Alamy*

U.S. VETERINARIAN WORKS TO SAVE CAMEROON'S ELEPHANTS

Mike Loomis has been returning to the wilds of the Cameroon each year for 15 years because he loves elephants and wants to save them.

Loomis and team collar an elephant in Mt. Cameroon National Park. *©North Carolina Zoological Park*

"I am passionate about elephant conservation," says the chief veterinarian at the North Carolina Zoological Park, "and I really like the country of Cameroon and the people of Cameroon. I enjoy the fieldwork. Physically it's difficult, but it's all worth it."

As part of his job at the North Carolina Zoological Park, Loomis, who also teaches zoological medicine at North Carolina State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, developed and now coordinates an elephant conservation project in Cameroon.

An estimated 1,000 to 5,000 African elephants remain in Cameroon. Populations have been decimated by poachers seeking ivory tusks and human populations encroaching on elephant habitats. To save the elephants, Loomis and a team that includes Cameroon officials and wildlife experts spend two months each year tracking and collaring elephants.

"By understanding the movement patterns of the elephants, we are getting an idea of when they leave protected areas and where they go when they leave the protected areas," Loomis said.

"Just Say No"

Authorities point to strong demand for specific wildlife products as a prime catalyst of trafficking, so many efforts to stop trafficking include campaigns directed toward consumers.

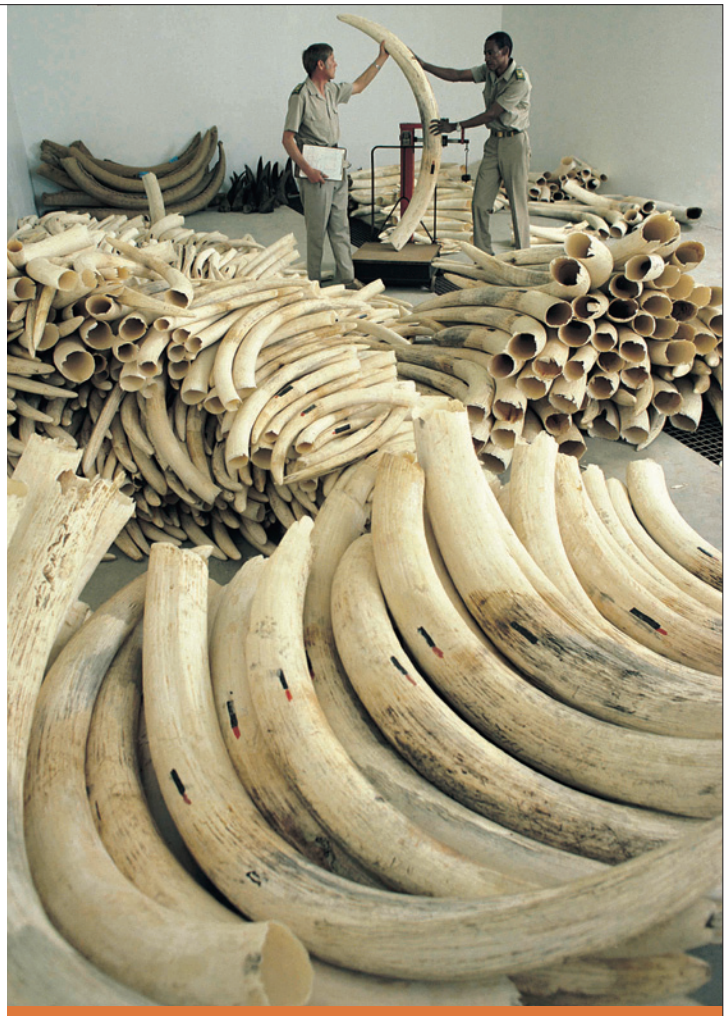
For example, with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, FREELAND Foundation runs awareness campaigns using videos, posters, billboards, websites and a mobile education unit in parts of the world where demand for products from endangered species is high.

Economic incentives, cultural or religious practices, and simple lack of consumer awareness contribute to the demand. Reversing traditional practices and resisting social pressures are difficult, but the long-term consequences of failure may be devastating.

Ivory is prized for jewelry, ornaments and religious carvings and is valued as a luxury item. A surge in rhino killings has been partially attributed to unsubstantiated claims of the horn as a cure for cancer, hangovers and impotence, among other maladies. Tigers are hunted for decorative items such as wall and floor coverings, as souvenirs and curios, and for traditional medicines.

The flow of ivory from Africa to East Asia has been estimated at 72 tons per year, worth $62 million, and equivalent to 7,000 elephants. The price of powdered rhino horn has reached $20,000 to $30,000 per kilo, and tiger skins retailed for up to $20,000 in 2009.

Of the fewer than 5,000 black rhinos remaining in Africa, one type, the Western Black Rhino, was declared extinct in 2011. ©*Images of Africa Photobank/Alamy*



Exact amounts are difficult to quantify, but authorities estimate the amount of ivory seized in 2011 at nearly 24 metric tonnes. ©*Stockbyte/Thinkstock*

Organized criminal networks are attracted to wildlife trafficking for high profitability and low risk of prosecution. In the international management of shipments, criminals do not hesitate to use violence, or threats of violence, against those who may stand in their way. Despite coordinated international efforts to stop wildlife trafficking, the threat continues because demand is high and there is money to be made.

What Is Being Done to Stop Wildlife Trafficking?

Many governments, intergovernmental bodies, law enforcement organizations and nongovernmental conservation groups are working to end wildlife trafficking. More than 170 nations adhere to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which sets

India's tiger reserves have helped stabilize numbers, but poaching in recent years puts the Bengal tiger at risk. ©*blickwinkel/Alamy*

standards aimed at ensuring that international wildlife trade does not threaten the survival of any species of wild animal or plant. In 1973, the United States was among the 21 original signatories.

In 2005, the U.S. Department of State created the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts among U.S. and foreign government agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. The strategy has four main objectives:

- Improve enforcement capacity;
- Reduce consumer demand;
- Implement tougher wildlife crime penalties; and
- Catalyze political will among supply and demand countries.

A primary focus has involved building a global system of regional wildlife enforcement networks, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network in Thailand and the South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network in Nepal. In April 2012, several Central African countries agreed to establish a wildlife enforcement network.

The networks work closely with law enforcement organizations through the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime and with major conservation organizations, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Wildlife Conservation Society, World Wildlife Fund, TRAFFIC International, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Conservation International, African Wildlife Foundation, WildAid and FREELAND Foundation.

While governments and NGOs struggle with political, economic and conservation issues, they agree that the most effective way to reduce wildlife trafficking and its devastating effects is to cut the consumer demand for products derived from scarce wildlife.